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**Autor:** Biemann, Ursula

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# Writing Desire

Ursula Biemann

Ursula Biemann is a video-essay artist who deals with the questions of globalization, geography and gender. In her video **REMOTE SENSING**, Biemann describes the so called "trafficking" – the sex trade of women in Southeastern Asia and Eastern Europe, together with this activity's antinomic link to new technologies. In her video **WRITING DESIRE**, electronic communication technologies redefine the boundaries between personal fantasies and public interaction spaces, enabling them to become permeable. As a result, our self-concepts and, too, the ways and means we use to conceive and achieve relationships, are subjected to countless transformations, all of which in turn affect our view of sexuality, gender, and social structures. **WRITING DESIRE** draws parallels between romantic longing, such as it is (re-)formulated in the electronic letter-writing culture, and the targeted production of such longings to meet the increasing demands of the electronic venue World Wide Web set up by our consumer society. **WRITING DESIRE**, Digital-Video-Essay, 25 min., 2000, in English, is on view in the [plug.in] living room. Essay excerpts and images give an idea of this artist's work.

*Say, have I turned into a permanent little icon on your screen?*

*I thought of recording a video, so I could speak to you. But then, it would seem such a violent shift from the purely semantic level to the representational image and electronic sounds. It's all too weird.*

*We carefully timed those instances when we added a further level of communication. Decrypting slowly.*

*Much later we exchanged pictures that weren't very revealing and we made fun of each other's desire to know more about a person through a picture of 72 dpi.*

decrypting slowly



Ursula Biemann, still 1 from WRITING DESIRE

**Rosi** (...) I do think the Net is a very large scene of fantasy, a phantasmatic scene. (...) Fantasies in the unconscious construct the social, so I'm not opposed to that, but to declare it sort of liberatory just because of that is really a little bit optimistic. I find that a lot of these long distance relationships do regenerate both the fantasy of the impossible object and a tremendous sort of melancholia. (...) I think that the physical embodied self needs the experience. Some of it can be produced and reproduced virtually, a lot of it not.

In the isolation of the private space of writing, released from the experience of physical proximity, personal fantasies reach a heightened intensity. The sensation of pure desire. The perfect one, the one emanating from no image, no aura, no voice, no body, no physical experience whatsoever, one that emerges completely from one's imagination. Culturally coded, of course. Always. Suspended realities that simulate a permanent state of being in love. A fantasy forever unfulfilled in its enactments. A sense of always approaching but never reaching.

she is the copy of the First World's past



Ursula Biemann, still 2 from WRITING DESIRE

emails conquer distance  
emails maintain distance  
emails mark exchanges  
and promise fulfillment  
the fulfillment of promise  
the bride is the promise  
the groom is the promise  
no longer physically delivered  
but electronically generated



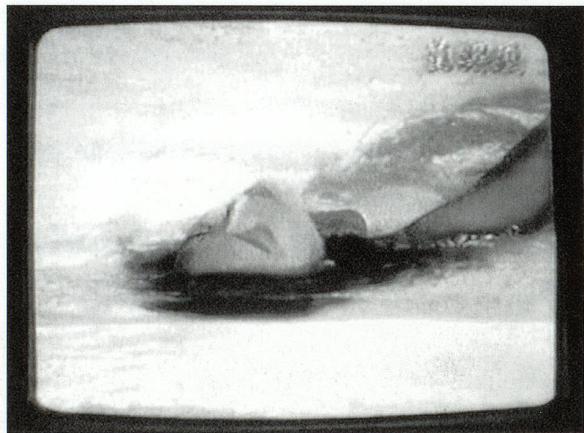
Ursula Biemann, still 3 from WRITING DESIRE

**Yvonne** I think this whole story about e-mail inspires a narcissistic element in oneself. You experience yourself as an actively desiring person who gets mirrored and this maintains an incredible stream of desire, troubled by nothing, in reality, which would bring this stream to a halt or flag or redirect it.

What's special about it is that with the e-mails you create a love story in which you are the protagonists. That is what is so interesting about it. You inscribe yourselves into this love discourse at the same time as you continue writing it through e-mails: in a written medium. What is important is the act of writing while the bodies are absent, it's all embodied in the writing. At the same time, the sexual discourse becomes important because it inspires an immediacy in oneself, suggesting that one gets some sort of satisfaction from receiving a message that is sexually charged. It would be wrong to infer that it replaces the body. The body doesn't disappear but is strongly present in the writing.

**Soki** (...) In the context of the globalized economy, women are commodified due to this technology. It facilitates easy transport and information to the buyers and allows the agents to publicize women and children to their prospective buyers in the global community. There are agents that go from one community to another recruiting for mail-order brides. It started as just a pen pal club actually, a legitimate pen pal club, and even now many young girls and women are not aware that they are already being used and publicized and sold to the Internet. Most of them are syndicated operations.

**bodies move through various spheres**  
**passing through transnational spaces**  
**shopping for another body**  
**that represents desire**  
**that represents pleasure**  
**bodies turn to images**  
**bodies turn to words**  
**bodies turn to codes**  
**culturally coded**  
**always**  
**a simple electronic device**  
**has allowed to order bodies**  
**passing borders**  
**passing officials**  
**passing through transnational wires**  
**to some proper place**



Ursula Biemann, still 4 from WRITING DESIRE

from interviews with Rosi Braidotti, Philosopher, Utrecht  
Yvonne Volkart, independent art critic and curator, Zürich  
Socorro Ballesteros, International Organisation for Migration, Manila